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SUBJECT: NIGERIA--AN IMPEACHMENT POST-MORTEM

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD JETER.

REASON: 1.5 (B) & (D)

1. (C) Summary: Roughly a month has passed since the impeachment threat against Obasanjo was effectively shelved; however, its repercussions continue to be felt throughout the Nigerian polity. President Obasanjo has been made painfully aware of his electoral vulnerabilities, and is trying to dramatically change his political style. With the PDP convention less than three weeks away, he seems to have done more politicking and outreach in the past month than all the previous months of the year put together. A gradual détente between Obasanjo and his Vice President would enhance re-nomination prospects and one appears to be emerging. Most insiders report Atiku has decided to cast his lot with Obasanjo. Nevertheless, opponents were encouraged by the impeachment drama. Other PDP candidates have emerged, Second Republic Vice President Alex Ekweume being the most formidable. Outside the PDP, the ANPP is canvassing the Southeast in search of a Southeast-North presidential ticket to oppose Obasanjo. The impeachment battle further accentuated regional politics and exposed latent fissures in the National Assembly. End Summary

President Obasanjo - Wounded and Wary

2. (C) The impeachment threat against Obasanjo was doused because of the sustained intervention of PDP party officials and former Heads of State Yakubu Gowon and Shehu Shagari. Even with the intercession of these former leaders, the settlement cost Obasanjo more than just his political standing and embarrassment. After acting dismissively toward the National Assembly for three years, he was compelled to assent to Assembly demands, inter alia, to increase spending on capital projects while also suspending the controversial privatization sales of rickety Nigerian Airways and the National Mint Company.

3. (C) True, ending the impeachment threat temporarily decreased the level of political suspense but did little to erase underlying tensions that led to the move in the first place. In reality, the impeachment threat was nothing more than the continuation of electoral politics by other means. Thus, while escaping this challenge, Obasanjo was in position to revel his survival. More than any other event during his Presidency, the impeachment showed Obasanjo the limits of presidential power and the depths of his unpopularity among the political elite, including those in his own party. Obasanjo was unable to repel the threat unilaterally. He needed the intervention of Gowon and Shagari to pacify the maverick PDP-dominated Assembly. Smugly ensconced in the lap of incumbency, Obasanjo had been guilty of hubris up to this point. Now he has taken on the contrite posture of a man who needed the help of Good Samaritans and passers-by to squelch a house fire willfully ignited by his own relatives, i.e. PDP National Assembly Members.

4. (C) Some of the support Obasanjo received during the impeachment was double-edged, however. As individuals and groups stood up to criticize the impeachment challenge, some Obasanjo advisors thought they could turn this to his electoral advantage. Their mistake was assuming a tight correlation between opposition to impeachment and support for reelection. Unfortunately for them, membership in the former group was larger than the latter. Several groups, including the Nigeria Bar Association and the "Patriots" group issued public statements opposing impeachment but endorsing a constitutional amendment for a five-year term for the President and Governors. These public

statements particularly hurt; both groups have strong Yoruba contingents and are dominated by Southerners. The most important Yoruba social group, "Afenifere," also opposed impeachment but was non-committal on Obasanjo's reelection. At least, the Bar Association and "Afenifere" members agreed to meet the President. "Ohaneze Ndigbo," the pre-eminent Igbo political organization, not only asked Obasanjo to step aside, they refused his invitation to meet. In a protocol conscious society, that rebuff was almost unprecedented. Instead of meeting Obasanjo as a group, Ohaneze sent former Biafran leader Ojukwu to talk to the President, symbolically a jab at Obasanjo, who, as a general, had led the defeat of Ojukwu and his Biafran succession. ("Ohaneze" claims the objective of an Igbo President is sine qua non for 12003. For them, there is no way the Yoruba Obasanjo can change his ethnic stripes.)

15. (C) Comment: Obasanjo is especially indebted to Gowon and Shagari for their roles in ending the impeachment drive. However, the President would rather not be indebted to these two Northern stalwarts. In the public eye, they could hold a special leverage over him. He would be very sensitive to a call from either or both for him to step down. People would give their statements much more credence since these men were allies who so recently and energetically fought for Obasanjo. They would see any negative reaction by Obasanjo to these statesmen as symptomatic of a person afflicted with a stubborn lust for office and power. Now with Alex Ekweume entering the race, Obasanjo has to be concerned that Shagari may ultimately be compelled to publicly support his former Vice President. End Comment.

16. (C) The impeachment showed several weaknesses in Obasanjo's Administration. Few of his Cabinet Ministers and others rose to his defense. Their relative silence was resounding and demonstrated a lack of deeply committed political support. Second, his public relations machinery was languid. His spin-doctors seemed to suffer from professional anemia; their passivity allowed the President's opponents to control the media agenda.

17. (C) However, all has not been gloomy for Obasanjo. In fact, his stock is better than it was in mid-November. Given the frenetic pace of events, the effect of many of the negative public statements made in November and October will have been dulled by the January 3-5 PDP national convention. Moreover, Obasanjo has been actively politicking and has replaced his general's scowl with a politician's smile. His triumphal visits to Osun, Oyo and Lagos states created positive press, varnished his Presidential patina and solidified his base in the Southwest. He was buoyed by the public exclamation of Lagos State Governor Bola Tinubu that Obasanjo could count as his the "5 million" voters in Lagos State. Tinubu's statement indicates that Obasanjo must have made electoral peace with the AD Governors of the Southwest, presumably eliciting their support by promising not to actively oppose their reelection. If so, Obasanjo has gone far in securing his Yoruba home turf.

18. (C) Obasanjo also formally jumpstarted his PDP re-nomination campaign in Enugu, in the Igbo Southeast. The symbolism could not be more apparent. In doing so, he was extending a hand in hopes of minimizing Igbo defections from his camp. (Igbos voted massively for Obasanjo in the 1999 election.)

VICE PRESIDENT ATIKU: PERHAPS NOT SO EAGER TO BOLT

19. (C) Governor Tinubu's endorsement of Obasanjo, if genuine, would indicate Vice President Atiku was having second thoughts about challenging his boss for the PDP nomination. Tinubu and Atiku are close friends and political allies albeit in different parties. Tinubu probably would not have so extravagantly lauded Obasanjo without a nod from Atiku. The Lagos Governor's statement could be unmitigated flimflam; however, that is unlikely. Stooping to such a crass, public deception would border the unconscionable even by Nigeria's forgiving standards of political misconduct.

¶10. (C) There is other evidence that Atiku does not appear as eager to bolt as he did one month ago. Realization of his own political liabilities might have tempered the Vice-President's ambitions. Moreover, several sources have informed us Obasanjo recently confronted Atiku with a dossier of financial improprieties to be made public should the Vice President defect. Atiku apparently did not purchase a presidential nomination application, a requisite to contesting as PDP standard-bearer in the upcoming convention. Although a Northerner, Atiku did not raise a peep when the PDP announced that it had "zoned" the presidency to the South, a move that would eliminate him from contention. He likely came to understand that many "supporters" were trying to inveigle him, hoping that an Obasanjo versus Atiku collision for the PDP nomination would disable them both. Instead of acting prematurely in the 2003 election, Atiku might now think he should bide his time until 2007. One of Atiku's fears has been that Obasanjo might dump him. Reverend Yusuf Obaje, Obasanjo's Chaplain, told Ambassador Jeter that recent conversations between Atiku and Obasanjo have helped clear the air: If he actively supports Obasanjo, Atiku will remain on the ticket.

¶11. (C) Obasanjo's olive leaf to Atiku was not the product of altruism. Given the strength of Atiku's position within the PDP and the Ekwueme's candidacy (which surprised Obasanjo), Obasanjo needs Atiku more than ever to be re-nominated. However, complete trust between the two will be very difficult to restore. Atiku and his supporters remain wary that Obasanjo might retain him just long enough to win renomination, then dump him. (Comment: This post-nomination ejection seems unlikely as it would hurt Obasanjo in the general election by splitting the party and further undermine Obasanjo in the Northeast. Moreover, Obasanjo's reputation for loyalty is already suspect; dropping the Vice President after using him to win the nomination would paint Obasanjo with the brush of ruthlessness, undermining the dual image of reform and new-found affability he is trying to convey. End comment)

¶12. (C) Sensing that Obasanjo is wounded, several candidates have emerged in the PDP, none more formidable than current PDP Board of Trustees Chairman and former Vice President Alex Ekweume. That the urbane Ekweume, a Southeastern Igbo, made his public announcement from Minna, the home of former Heads of State Babangida and Abdulsalaam, was symbolic. It was intended to convey that Ekweume, not Obasanjo, has the backing of these two former leaders. This is an important omen to PDP watchers; if true, it represents a change in fortunes from 1999 when Babangida's intervention allowed Obasanjo to snatch the PDP nomination from Ekweume's hands at the eleventh hour of the party convention.

¶13. However, the fact that Babangida absented himself from Minna the day of Ekweume's declaration might have diluted the intended message, leaving everyone still wondering about Babangida's intentions. Ironically, Ekweume's candidacy might push some Igbos toward Obasanjo. There are several younger Igbos who desire to be Nigeria's First Citizen, but see 2007 or 2011 as their dates with destiny. If Ekweume wins in 2003, another Igbo might not get a chance to contest for the presidency for nearly twenty years given the predilection to "zone" offices among the six geopolitical regions on a rotational basis. End Comment)

THE ANPP: COURTING THE SOUTHEAST AND SOUTH-SOUTH

¶14. (C) Meanwhile, the leading opposition party, the ANPP, moved to capitalize on the anti-Obasanjo sentiment exposed during the impeachment drama. Ironically, the ANPP has been attempting to shed its image as a Northern-dominated party by acknowledging its Northern domination. The party is using the carrot of its solid support in the North to entice politicians in the Southeast and South-South to abandon the PDP. Consequently, the ANPP held large rallies in Port Harcourt (South-South) and Enugu (Southeast) in late November. Additionally, the ANPP

has been courting the leadership of "Ohaneze Ndigbo" and various South-South groups, dangling before them the possibility of a Southeast/North or a South-South/North presidential ticket to oppose Obasanjo. Moderate ANPP Northerners hope this tack of keeping the Presidency in the South in 2003 would attract anti-Obasanjo Southerners to the party. The presidency would then be zoned to the North in 2007. This would suit the likes of players like ANPP acting National Chairman, Sokoto State Governor Bafarawa, who reportedly have their eyes on the 2007 ANPP nomination.

15. (C) The ANPP stands to gain defectors from PDP National Assembly Members who openly endorsed Obasanjo's impeachment. These PDP Members fear for their careers should they remain in the PDP and Obasanjo win re-nomination. Already, former Senate President Okadigbo has bolted to the ANPP. Current Senate President Anyim and others have been contemplating the move for months. They might find a safe place to land in the ANPP. Devoid of serious candidates in many areas of the Southeast and South-South, the ANPP has been offering many PDP office holders the counterpart ANPP nominations if they crossed the carpet. In the final analysis, the ANPP stands to gain numerous defections and win more support in the Southeast and South-South unless Obasanjo convinces mutinous National Assembly Members that he will not act vindictively if he wins. For his part, Ekwueme need to keep as many National Assembly Members as possible in the PDP; he will need their voted at the national convention where they are ex officio delegates.

CHARGES AND COUNTER-CHARGES IN THE UPPER CHAMBER

16. (C) From the looks of things in the Senate, it appears that Obasanjo is not very interested in mending fences with the National Assembly leadership and those members who advocated his ouster. During the impeachment drive, the Assembly leadership not only attacked Obasanjo but also removed his real and suspected supporters from key committee memberships. Obasanjo supporters sought retribution through the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). A House Member filed a petition against House Speaker Na'Abba for allegedly diverting government funds to private purposes. In a much more sensational move, Senator Arthur Nzeribe filed a petition with ICPC claiming he distributed over 300 million Naira to Senators, including the Senate leadership, in bribes to end the Obasanjo impeachment. The amoral Nzeribe filed the petition after being suspended from the Senate when his attempt to impeach Senate President Anyim failed.

17. (C) Anyim and Na'Abba rushed to court in late November, obtaining injunctions to suspend the ICPC investigations. They also hurriedly established special committees to consider repealing the ICPC enabling legislation. In an act of nearly unparalleled shamelessness, the two lawmakers filed suit to have the law establishing the ICPC declared unconstitutional; this despite the fact that they were the ones who shepherded the measure through their respective Chambers. Sadly, the politicization of the ICPC, which was to be the GON's anti-corruption flagship, has been an unfortunate offshoot of the impeachment machinations.

A RISE IN REGIONALISM

18. (C) While most of the intrigue has been among the political elite, public psychology also has been influenced. Perhaps the most noticeable consequence has been the exacerbation of regional identification. Part of the reason Obasanjo could solidify his base in the Yoruba Southwest was that Yorubas saw impeachment as an attempt by Northerners to snatch power not just from Obasanjo but from them. Many non-Yoruba Southerners also saw it as a Northern ploy to wrest power. Yet, instead of rallying around Obasanjo, these non-Yoruba measured Obasanjo's popularity, found it wanting and sensed he could be defeated. Thus, many politicians in other areas of the South began to

clamor more loudly for a Southern President other than Obasanjo. In the North, the impeachment reinforced negative views of Obasanjo held by large swaths of the population. The sense that the president was weakened and susceptible to further embarrassment by his opponents might also have indirectly encouraged the instigators of the Kaduna and Abuja anti-Miss World protests, and the rioting that ensued.

COMMENT

19. (C) The impeachment and developments surrounding it have brought the challenges to Obasanjo's re-nomination into sharper focus. He has a better sense of his allies, opportunistic straphangers, his enemies and the questions that must be answered if his re-nomination run is to be successful. Obasanjo was clearly wounded by the impeachment. It was akin to dropping a weight on the foot of an unsuspecting sprinter as he approached the starting line. However, the benefits and trappings of incumbency and his influence over the electoral bodies make Obasanjo's race to the finish line shorter than his opponents'. While he is far from a shoe-in, there is a sense that he has rebounded to some extent. If Obasanjo can retain Atiku's allegiance and minimize Babangida's dabbling in the PDP, he still has the inside track to the nomination, albeit with the well-respected Ekweume close on his heels.
JETER